

The mastering of metal processing technology was a significant moment in the prehistory of European communities. At first copper and gold nuggets were exploited. In time, these communities learnt to smelt copper from various minerals. The true breakthrough came with the mastering of methods in extracting bronze – an alloy of copper and tin. On the one hand, this was tied to technological issues and on the other, social transformations were important – ones that made possible contacts between distant regions of the continent where available minerals could be found that allowed for the extraction of copper and tin. These occurred only in some regions of Europe, where tin was especially rare. Almost at the same time as the ability to produce metal, the custom of hoard deposition became commonplace. This refers to the assemblages of several objects, in this case, metal ones either deposited in the earth or rivers, lakes and marshes in this same time. In truth, similar phenomena are known from earlier periods, made up of, for example, stone and flint objects, but the number of hoards containing bronze objects is far greater (at this moment we know 1100 hoards from Poland). This is all the more intriguing because copper and tin was a raw material occurring in limited quantity.

These spectacular assemblages, often composed of several hundred objects, are one of the most enigmatic archaeological finds. As much as archaeologists investigating prehistoric settlements or graves of a similar vintage are familiar with their basic function and can analyse other, more detailed archaeological questions, archaeology scholars investigating hoards once having found an artefact, magnifying glass and book in hand, have to deliberate as to what functions these enigmatic finds fulfilled. This matter is not made any easier by the fact that such hoards are discovered by chance and often reach archaeologists with some delay with a general account of their discovery.

The past few years have, however, brought significant discoveries. In Rosko, in the north Wielkopolska, a hoard deposit was found, made up of nearly 70 axes. Of even greater importance is the fact that this is a deposit in a boulder construction with an earthen mound (www.rosko.prv.pl). Excavations research results show that this construction arose in relation to the deposit of the aforementioned artefacts. Subsequent investigations have demonstrated that this was also the case in two other sites nearby – in the area around Wągrowiec.

In our day and age archaeologists have at their disposal a veritable Smörgåsbord, as it were, of research methods. On the one hand, these can be of help in the localisation of similar constructions and on the other, the opportunity to unearth a barrow-full of information on this very subject. The Bronze Age communities might have deposited hoards both in constructions raised for this purpose, as in the case of Rosko, as well as in exploited mounds established hitherto. It is the search for such constructions that this project – detailed below – shall be focused on.

Wishing to understand for what purposes prehistoric peoples deposited metal objects in the ground or water one needs to consider also the location in question. On the one hand the physical geography of a given locus is important – for example whether there was a suitable rise or perhaps a site by a river. Of equal importance was the question, however, whether the site in question was close or indeed far from the settlement, or whether perhaps the hoard was deposited on the borderland of an oecumene or perhaps in its centre. Investigations of this type were conducted recently (www.digitarchoe.pl/METAL-GRANICA-RYTUAL) and indicated that research of this nature provides the opportunity to better understand the phenomenon of depositing metal objects – another aspect of the above-mentioned study.

In as much as an outline of site profile for metal object deposition is important, equally so is the information on metal artefacts found in a given location. A microscopic analysis of use-wear provides the opportunity to reconstruct the process of construction and exploitation in respect to metal objects. These, in turn, provide an opportunity for a better understanding of questions in respect to the workings of metallurgy processes, as well as interpretation of cultural motives tied to the belief systems of those depositing metal objects in the ground or water.

Archaeologists undertaking the research project, *A Biography of Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages Hoards. A Multi-Aspectual Analysis of Metal Objects Related to Monumental Constructions in Poland*, have therefore set themselves specific research goals. These are the collection of information from various channels and as a result, the creation of a compendium of specific hoards so as to unfold the prehistory of metal objects exploitation and reconstruction of deposition. This, it is envisaged, shall serve to explain more fully one of the most enigmatic phenomena in European archaeology.